Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL JNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE

AUDIT REPORT Report Number 23-121-R24 | November 15, 20



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Highlights

Background

Each year, increased package volume and operational changes during the peak mailing season (peak season) — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve — significantly strain the Postal Service's processing and distribution networks. To help handle this increase, the Postal Service creates peak season initiatives. These preparedness initiatives are meant to help the Postal Service have the right amount of personnel, resources, and package capacity throughout its processing, transportation, and delivery networks.

What We Did

We evaluated the Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2024 peak season. We also conducted fieldwork at high performing processing and distribution centers and associated offices to assess best practices and lessons learned.

What We Found

We found the Postal Service developed its FY 2024 peak season preparedness initiatives to build upon the successes it had during prior peak seasons. Specifically, the Postal Service's FY 2024 peak season initiatives spanned multiple functions, including processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations. In addition, the Postal Service continued to implement permanent operational changes year-round — such as increasing employee complement and facility space — to plan for the large increase in package volume that management expects during its upcoming peak season. The Postal Service's FY 2024 peak season initiatives include:

- Completing seasonal hiring plans.
- Acquiring additional space to supplement processing operations.
- Focusing on processing facilities following their planned operational schedule.
- Conducting internal audits of efficiency and effectiveness for mail processing.
- Forecasting mail volumes and assigning adequate transportation.
- Developing and employing monitoring and reporting tools across components.
- Assessing staffing and resource needs at retail and delivery units.
- Executing a customer experience strategy in retail units.



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Recommendations

The Postal Service has developed plans to handle the upcoming peak season. If the initiatives are implemented as planned and volume forecasts are accurate, the Postal Service should be prepared for peak season; therefore, we are not issuing a recommendation at this time.

Transmittal Letter

OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE November 15, 2023 **MEMORANDUM FOR:** DANE A. COLEMAN VICE PRESIDENT, PROCESSING AND MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS ANGELA H. CURTIS VICE PRESIDENT, DELIVERY OPERATIONS ROBERT CINTRON VICE PRESIDENT, LOGISTICS FROM: Kelly Thresher Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Field Operations SUBJECT: Audit Report - Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness (Report Number 23-121-R24) This report presents the results of our audit of Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness. We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact John Littlejohn, Director, Seasonal Performance and Postal Regulatory Commission, or me at 703-248-2100. Attachment cc: Postmaster General Corporate Audit Response Management

Results

Introduction/Objective

This report presents the results of our self-initiated audit of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness (Project Number 23-121). Our objective was to evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2024 peak mailing season. See Appendix A for additional information about this audit.

Background

Each year, increased mail volume and operational changes during the peak mailing season (peak season) — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve significantly strain the Postal Service's processing and distribution. To help handle this increase, the Postal Service creates peak initiatives for processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations.

⁶⁶Each year, increased mail volume and operational changes during the peak mailing season (peak season) — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve — significantly strain the Postal Service's processing and distribution.⁹⁹

As noted in prior peak season audit reports,¹ Postal Service management develops yearround strategies in preparation for peak season by implementing permanent operational changes. Generally, the Postal Service successfully implemented initiatives during the FY 2023 peak season. Specifically, the Postal Service hired and converted temporary employees² to career positions, deployed more package sorting machines than planned, and increased operating plan precision³ compared to same period last year (SPLY). Service performance scores increased for market dominant products,⁴ and the Postal Service reduced the average time it took to deliver Priority Mail⁵ and packages.⁶ Also, while this did not appear to negatively impact overall peak season performance, we identified an increase in Customer 360⁷ (C360) customer inquiries related to delivery. In the Service Performance During the FY 2023 Peak Mailing Season audit, we recommended the Vice President of Delivery Operations develop measurable targets to address increases in customer inquiries during peak season. Postal Service management agreed with the finding and recommendation. Specifically, management will implement a process to respond to inquiries within three business days and will identify locations that need help based on key operational performance indicators in conjunction with C360 data. This process will continue to be refined as opportunities develop.

The Postal Service experienced lower-thananticipated volume during the FY 2023 peak season. The Postal Service adjusted its plan during the FY 2023 peak season to accommodate the lower volume, which contributed to a decline of workhours and fewer leases for temporary annexes. Management indicated they expect the same or less volume during peak season FY 2024 than they had the previous year. For example, for letters, peak season did not represent the highest volume of FY 2023, as it did in the previous fiscal year (see Figure 1).

¹ Service Performance During the FY 2023 Peak Mailing Season (Report Number 23-025-R23, dated July 13, 2023) and Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness (Report Number 22-163-R23, dated November 14, 2022).

Temporary employees are sometimes called non-career employees or pre-career employees. They do not receive the same benefits as career employees.
Operating plan precision measures how closely to plan each processing facility ran on a daily basis.

⁴ Market dominant products include First-Class composite, Periodicals, and Marketing Mail.

⁵ Priority Mail included that which was transported via air and surface modes.

⁶ First-Class Package Service hereinafter called packages.

⁷ A cloud-based application that enables Postal Service employees to diagnose, resolve, and track customer inquiries.

Figure 1. Comparison of Letter Volume, FYs 2022-2023



Source: OIG analysis of backend data from Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW), which is a repository intended for all data and the central source for information on retail, financial, and operational performance. Mission-critical information comes to EDW from transactions that occur across the mail delivery system, points-of-sale, and other sources.

For flats, volume was highest during peak season (in November) in FY 2022 but did not reach its highest volume of the year during peak season in FY 2023 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Comparison of Flats Volume, FYs 2022-2023



Source: OIG analysis of EDW.

For packages, the volume processed during peak season was the highest of FY 2023 (see Figure 3). However, the Postal Service experienced a drop in volume of pieces compared to peak season FY 2022 (percent decrease). ⁶⁶ However, the Postal Service experienced a drop in volume of pieces compared to peak season FY 2022 (percent decrease). In addition, this year, for the first time since 2020, the Postal Service will not levy additional holiday surcharges on package products.⁹⁹

In addition, this year, for the first time since 2020, the Postal Service will not levy additional holiday surcharges on package products.⁸

Figure 3. Comparison of Package Volume, FYs 2022-2023



Source: OIG analysis of EDW.

This audit evaluated the Postal Service's FY 2024 peak season preparedness initiatives from processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations. In addition, we conducted site observations and interviews to assess best practices and lessons learned at the San Bernardino Processing and Distribution Center (P&DC), San Bernardino, CA; Beaumont Post Office, Beaumont, CA; Moreno Valley Post Office, Moreno Valley, CA; Mid-Island P&DC,

⁸ Since peak season FY 2021, the Postal Service has placed temporary surcharges on most package products, including Priority Mail Express, Priority Mail, Parcel Select, First-Class Package Service, USPS Retail Ground, and Parcel Return Service.

Melville, NY; Central Islip Main Post Office, Central Islip, NY; and Holbrook Main Post Office, Holbrook, NY.

Finding #1: FY 2024 Peak Season Preparedness

The Postal Service developed its FY 2024 peak season preparedness initiatives to build upon the successes it had during prior peak seasons. Specifically, the Postal Service's FY 2024 peak season initiatives spanned multiple functions, including processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations. In addition, the Postal Service continued to implement permanent operational changes yearround — such as increasing employee complement and facility space — to plan for the large increase in package volume that management expects during its upcoming peak season.

Processing and Distribution Operations

To prepare for and operate effectively during peak season, processing and distribution management completed a staffing plan, plans to acquire space to supplement operations, focus on processing facilities following their planned operational schedules, conduct internal mail processing audits, and complete maintenance guidance.

Peak Season Staffing

Processing and distribution management plans to hire 5,480 seasonal employees⁹ to support operations in processing facilities, with start dates as early as October 2023 (see Table 1). The FY 2024 processing hiring plan is 75 percent lower than the employees hired in support of the FY 2023 peak season.

⁶⁶ Processing and distribution management plans to hire 5,480 seasonal employees to support operations in processing facilities, with start dates as early as October 2023.⁹⁹

Postal Service management attributed the success of year-round hiring strategies to the decrease in peak season hiring requests.

Facility Space

The Postal Service planned to leverage space created by removing Flats Sequencing System¹⁰ (FSS) machines in processing and distribution centers.¹¹ From April 2021 through August 2023, the USPS removed all 100 FSS machines. Each machine occupied about 25,000 square feet. For example, Mid-Island P&DC management stated that space will be used for overflow package volume staging and processing. See Figure 4, which shows space in the Mid-Island P&DC where four FSS machines were removed.

Employee Type	FY 2024 Peak Hiring Plans	FY 2023 Peak Hiring Actual	Difference	Percentage Difference
Postal Support Employee	1,800	12,737	(10,937)	(86%)
Mail Handler Assistant	3,680	8,795	(5,115)	(58%)
Total	5,480	21,532	(16,052)	(75%)

Table 1. FY 2024 and FY 2023 Peak Season Employee Hiring Comparison

Source: OIG analysis of Postal Service data.

11 The Postal Service uses Automated Flat Sorting Machine 100s (AFSM100), which are fully automated machines that process flat-size mail.

⁹ Seasonal employees are hired to work during a particular season or event.

¹⁰ A two-pass flats sorting machine that automates the sorting of flat-sized mail into precise delivery order.

Figure 4. Mid-Island P&DC



Source: OIG photo taken on September 12, 2023.

Additionally, Postal Service management plans to lease nine temporary peak processing annexes with supplemental square footage starting in October 2023 (see Table 2).

Table 2. Requested Temporary Peak ProcessingAnnexes

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Operating Plan Precision

Operating plan precision measures how well each processing facility followed its operational schedule daily, as well as whether processing facilities met their expected clearance times.¹² During the FY 2023 peak season, mail processing attained an operating plan precision score of 74.19 percent. Management stated that operating plan precision will continue to be a focus during the upcoming peak season. The target through September 30, 2023, for operating plan precision was 79 percent.¹³ From October 1, 2022, to September 1, 2023, the national operating plan precision score was 87.42 percent.

Mail Processing Audits

Local plant management was expected to conduct audits of mail processing operations in all P&DCs by September 22, 2023. These Postal Service-conducted audits focused on lean mail processing operations, which is defined as organizing the workroom floor so that operations run smoothly and allow efficient mailflow on a day-to-day basis. Specifically, these audits reported on dock operations; mail transport equipment;¹⁴ and package, letter, and flat operations. As of October 2, 2023, 292 of 305 site audits (95.7 percent) had been conducted nationwide.¹⁵ Management stated the next milestone is for the sites to create improvement action plans based on their audit findings. Action plans are due by October 13, 2023.

During our visits, we observed examples of lean mail processing. These observations included clean workroom floors, proper signage, and clear aisles between operational areas within the P&DCs (see Figure 5).

Source: Postal Service management.

¹² Clearance times are the latest time committed mail can clear an operation for proper dispatch or delivery.

¹³ Target obtained from National Performance Assessment system on Postal Service intranet. The web-based system collects performance-related metrics.

¹⁴ Containers used for mail processing or transportation within or between facilities.

¹⁵ Western Division management was given an extension until October 4, 2023, to complete audits for three sites due to reorganization activities occurring at the same time.

Figure 5. Examples of Lean Mail Processing

San Bernardino P&DC



Mid-Island P&DC



Source: OIG Photos taken August 24, 2023, and September 12, 2023.

In addition, HQ management stated they began calls with processing and distribution division management in August 2023 to discuss peak season planning. Management developed a regimented communication plan and call schedule that intensifies as peak season nears and progresses.

Maintenance

Nationally, maintenance has provided key initiatives to help prepare for peak season. Specifically, Maintenance Technical Support Center¹⁶ published maintenance guidance that led to work orders to correct issues on equipment. These corrections are tracked, and progress reports are generated by equipment, by facility. They also identify machines that are at risk based on results of the guidance.

Best Practices

We conducted observations and interviews at two P&DCs that effectively processed and transported mail during peak season FY 2023. The employees shared some of the activities they felt contributed to their success, which included:

- Ordering replacement maintenance parts prior to peak season to be ready for any machine issues that could arise.
- Conducting major preventative maintenance closer to peak season.
- Holding an after-action report (lessons learned) meeting after every holiday and using the results to fine-tune existing processes.

Logistics Operations

Logistics management organized peak season preparation into planning, monitoring, and reporting. The logistics group will plan out how much space they predict they will need on trucks and planes to move mail between facilities and to delivery units. They plan to consistently verify volume expectations as peak season begins to ensure the Postal Service has trucks and airplane capacity available in the right regions, when needed. Logistics management will monitor volumes and make adjustments to air capacity in specific regions of the country. For trucking, the Postal Service will use

¹⁷ to meet anticipated demand for long haul transportation. In a press release issued in September 2023, the Postal Service said it will transport 95 percent of all volume by ground transportation, rather than air. In addition, logistics personnel collaborated with processing and distribution personnel to develop a peak readiness checklist for processing facilities.¹⁸ Local processing and distribution, maintenance, and logistics management complete the checklist and the results are reported at the regional and national levels. HQ logistics personnel stated they hold weekly meetings to discuss readiness with division directors.

16 The resource for help with broken equipment, technical questions, and software needs 17

¹⁸ The peak season readiness checklist focuses on defining, developing, and conducting training; assessing maintenance needs; completing equipment relocation; and determining peak annex readiness.

Additionally, logistics management plans to use several tools to monitor and report on preparedness and performance for peak season. The HQ logistics team is evaluating options to improve and reintroduce its HQ Peak Network Operations Control Center (Peak NOCC). The Peak NOCC team provides proactive support to the field with the ability to detect, prevent, and mitigate any negative impacts to ensure millions of letters and packages are handled efficiently and economically from origin to destination. The Peak NOCC has been established, and management intends for it to be fully operational by the start of peak mailing season.

Retail and Delivery Operations

Retail and delivery management developed initiatives to ensure adequate personnel and vehicles at retail and delivery units as well as introduced a customer experience strategy for retail during peak season.

Specifically, management planned to hire 4,480 retail and delivery seasonal employees, with start dates as early as November (see Table 3). Of these, the Postal Service plans to hire double the number of city carrier assistants this peak season compared to last. However, they plan to hire fewer retail and delivery clerks. Overall, the retail and delivery peak hiring plan was 30 percent lower than the actual hiring in FY 2023, with management stating that peak season hiring plans were the lowest they had been in five years.¹⁹ Similar to processing management, the retail and delivery group attributed the lower seasonal hiring to the success of year-round hiring strategies. In addition, retail and delivery management identified delivery units that will need supplemental carriers and vehicles during peak. Further, to address the anticipated increase in package volume for select units, management created a plan for additional package delivery runs between 6 and 9 a.m., before normal street deliveries begin.

Customer Experience Strategy

Retail and delivery management identified peak specific initiatives related to customer experience. Specifically, units will prepare retail lobbies for peak season with holiday signage, hire supplemental lobby assistants, and increase their focus on self-service kiosk supplies.²⁰ In addition, HQ will send C360 inquiry status reports to delivery and retail units daily, with the goal of responding to customer inquiries within one day.

Best Practices/Lessons Learned

We conducted interviews with the California-6 and New York-2 District management. They shared some best practices of the activities they have previously done to address peak season challenges in retail and delivery operations. Those activities included:

- Designating a district peak coordinator.
- Planning and hosting a carrier symposium that focused on scanning, uniforms, safety, and integrity topics.
- Reviewing C360 inquiries multiple times a day and contacting customers through multiple communication channels, such as via e-mail and telephone.

Employee Type	FY 2024 Peak Hiring Plans	FY 2023 Peak Hiring Actual	Difference	Percentage Difference
Holiday City Carrier Assistant	577	192	385	201%
Holiday Clerk Assistant	3,903	6,222	(2,319)	(37%)
Total	4,480	6,414	(1,934)	(30%)

Table 3. FY 2024 and FY 2023 Peak Season Employee Hiring Comparison

Source: OIG analysis of Postal Service data.

¹⁹ Management did not plan to hire seasonal rural carriers. Christmas assistance will be provided to regular rural carriers by replacement carriers. Regular rural carriers can perform Christmas assistance on their day off.

²⁰ A Self-Service Kiosk (SSK) enables customers to perform some basic transactions that otherwise would be conducted at the full-service retail counter. Transactions available from an SSK include shipping packages, buying stamps, and looking up ZIP Codes.

Both districts conducted lessons learned events after the previous peak season to identify opportunities to improve for the current peak season. District management shared and discussed lessons learned with HQ management. Improvements included:

- Targeting early morning package deliveries.
- Including vehicle maintenance facility management in weekly peak operations meetings.
- Meeting with logistics management on transportation schedules to address late and combined trips.
- Focusing on employee attendance and retention by using an attendance tracker, as well as communicating with and mentoring staff.

The Postal Service has developed plans to handle the upcoming peak season. If the initiatives are implemented as planned and volume forecasts are accurate, the Postal Service should be prepared for peak season; therefore, we are not issuing a recommendation at this time.

However, the Postal Service is undertaking significant changes to its network and products this year. Specifically, changes to processing put the Postal Service at risk for parcel delays, which the OIG observed during another audit.²¹ The Postal Service is continuing to adjust operations as it makes changes. Therefore, we encourage the Postal Service to be proactive and transparent in communicating network issues and service disruptions to its customers throughout the FY 2024 peak season. We plan to monitor conditions and evaluate service performance throughout the FY 2024 peak season and issue a report on any challenges identified.

Management's Comments

Management generally agreed with the finding.

See Appendix B for management's comments in their entirety.

Management noted that the report reflects their comprehensive plan and acknowledges they have achieved the key components of our plan. They stated their efforts are designed to ensure they are well-prepared to reliably and effectively process and deliver the anticipated peak season volume.

In addition, management acknowledges there is some risk associated with the significant changes to the network and how products are processed. They believe that the benefits of streamlining operations outweigh the risk. Also, the changes reduce the annual peak season air capacity constraints. Management stated they are prepared to mitigate any risk associated with the changes.

Further, management said they appreciate our ongoing dialogue and the opportunity to fully describe their robust, organization-wide efforts to prepare for peak season and to execute related strategies. Management remains confident that they will be very successful.

Evaluation of Management's Comments

The OIG considers management's comments responsive to the finding in the report.

21 Efficiency of Operations at the North Houston Processing and Distribution Center, Houston, TX, Project Number 23-150.

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Appendix A: Additional Information

Scope and Methodology

The scope of the audit includes the Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2024 peak season.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Evaluated the Postal Service's preparedness plan for FY 2024 peak season.
- Interviewed HQ officials and regional management to discuss FY 2023 peak season challenges, causes for poor performance, lessons learned, and best practices that can be incorporated into the FY 2024 peak season planning.
- Conducted site visits to two high performing mail processing facilities in the Eastern and Western regions, as well as two delivery units serviced by each that have had challenges as they relate to customer inquiries.

We conducted this performance audit from August through November 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and included such tests of internal controls as we considered necessary under the circumstances. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We discussed our observations and conclusions with management on October 12 and 20, 2023, and included their comments where appropriate. In planning and conducting the audit, we obtained an understanding of processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations internal control structure to help determine the nature, timing, and extent of our audit procedures. We reviewed the management controls for overseeing the program and mitigating associated risks. Additionally, we assessed the internal control components and underlying principles, and we determined that the following three components were significant to our audit objective:

- Control Activities
- Information and Communicating
- Monitoring

We developed audit work to ensure that we assessed these controls. Based on the work performed, we did not identify internal control deficiencies that were significant within the context of our objectives.

We assessed the reliability of EDW data by reviewing existing information, comparing data from other sources regarding the data, and interviewing Postal Service officials knowledgeable about the data. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

Prior Audit Coverage

Report Title	Objective	Report Number	Final Report Date	Monetary Impact
Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Season Preparedness	Evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2022 peak mailing season.	21-206-R22	November 19, 2021	None
Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Mailing Season	Evaluate Postal Service performance during the FY 2022 peak mailing season and implementation of its peak season preparedness plan.	22-039-R22	June 23, 2022	None
Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness	Evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2023 peak mailing season.	22-163-R23	November 14, 2022	None
Service Performance During the FY 2023 Peak Mailing Season	Evaluate Postal Service performance during the FY 2023 peak mailing season and implementation of its peak season preparedness plan.	23-025-R23	July 13, 2023	None

Appendix B: Management's Comments



November 6, 2023

JOHN CIHOTA DIRECTOR, AUDIT SERVICES

SUBJECT: Management Response: Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness (Audit 23-121-DRAFT)

Thank you for providing the Postal Service with an opportunity to review and comment on the findings and recommendations contained in the draft audit report *Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness*. We appreciate that the report reflects our comprehensive plan and acknowledges that we have achieved the key components of our plan. Our efforts are designed to ensure that we are well-prepared to reliably and effectively process and deliver the volume that we anticipate receiving this year.

Postal Management generally agrees with the findings of the audit. While we acknowledge that there is some risk associated with the significant changes to our network and how we process our products, we believe that the benefits of streamlining operations outweigh the risk. The changes also reduce the annual peak season air capacity constraints. We are prepared to mitigate any risk associated with the changes.

Postal Management appreciates our ongoing dialogue and the opportunity to fully describe our robust, organization-wide efforts to prepare for our peak season and to execute related strategies. We remain confident that we will be very successful.

E-SIGNED by ISAAC.S CRONKHITE on 2023-11-06 13:45:07 EST

Isaac Cronkhite Chief Processng and Distribution Officer and Executive Vice President

cc: Corporate Audit Response Management

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